IDEAS AT *Work*

COMPUTERS / HILLEL SEGAL

Program tracks time users spend on PC jobs

A computer-related problem faced by some businesses is their inability to accurately track the time spent by employees for various projects.

Such cost accounting is often necessary to properly price the company's products or services. Similarly, for professionals such as accountants, consultants and lawyers it's important to keep track of the time spent on each client's work for billing purposes.

How is this typically done?

Until now, it did not matter if the company used personal computers or not. The only solution was rather "low-tech" — a handwritten time log. Of course, time logs need constant, hour-by-hour attention, and then extra time each week or month to summarize the results.

Segal

Some highly automated offices have computerized systems that allow secretaries to input the handwritten hourly data into a computer for summarization and reporting, but this is rare.

As it turns out, even if much of the work being tracked is done on a personal computer, it is usually still necessary to keep the time log by hand and compile the results by hand. In this age of computers, that seems unnecessary.

Unfortunately, the perfectly automatic time log does not yet exist. It would have to read our brain waves, determine which project we're thinking about, and record the time accordingly.

But short of that ideal, I've just discovered one program that will certainly be appreciated if your office uses personal computers extensively.

Called **Direct Access** , this program keeps track of each person's computer usage, along with the time spent on each project. The program is made by Delta Technology International of Eau Claire, Wis. It costs $89.95.

Its best feature is that it's completely passive — after you enter your name and project number when you log on the computer, no

benefit. The program is advertised as "the ultimate hard disk menu system" for IBM PCs and PC-compatible computers with hard disks. Its main purpose is to provide an easy-to-use way for inexperienced users to load and use programs.

A consultant or programmer usually sets up the system so that each user only needs to enter a key stroke or two when logging on, thus eliminating some of the complicated DOS (disk operating system) commands that might otherwise be necessary. Colorful menus are provided with all the alternatives, and a byproduct of the process is that usage tracking data is collected.

Although I'm impressed with the capabilities of Direct Access, there are a few drawbacks that could limit its usefulness in some situations:

✔ The usage tracking feature is not effective when "memory resident" programs are used, when you use programs such as Memory Switch or Double DOS that allow you to switch programs without going back to the main menu, or when "windowing" programs are used. In other words, it's necessary for everyone in your office to follow the rules in order for the tracking feature to be effective. In this case, it is the fault of the program that it is not more versatile.

✔ It's easy to fool or defeat the system if desired. An experienced user will simply go around the program and do whatever he or she wants to do. This absence of security is a disadvantage if many people are using your company's computers and one of the purposes of the tracking program is to provide control.

✔ The program keeps on accumulating time, even when the user is not using the program on the screen. If the user is distracted by a long telephone call, or if he or she takes a coffee break, time marches on. You might think that that's not the fault of the program. After all, how is it supposed to know if you arelooking at the

further action is necessary to trigger the time log. It calculates exactly how much time you spend on the current project. Then, when you switch tasks, you merely enter the new project number and proceed.

At the end of each week, the computer provides a summarized list of all the people who used the computer, along with the project names and amount of time spent on each one. As long as the work being tracked is all done on the computer, you're in luck. After Direct Access is set up, you'll never have to use a handwritten time log again.

Interestingly, computer usage tracking is not even touted as one of the key features of Direct Access. It simply comes as an extra screen or not? But it would be relatively easy for the authors of Direct Access to build in a feature to shut off the timer if there is no activity on the screen.

✔ Lastly, and this is not the fault of the program, it is only a good substitute for a manual time-log when most or all of the work being timed is done on the personal computer. The program does not track the time spent doing other project-related work without the computer.

Recommendation: For business situations that will be aided by automatic tracking of various personal computer projects, Direct Access is a good buy. In order for it to be most effective, however, expert installation and customization are required.

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